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ABSTRACT

Naturalistic observation of the spontaneous role-taking behavior of 16 four-year-old children (8 boys, 8 girls) in a free play situation with a same-sex peer was used to investigate the sex role perceptions and preferences of young children. Videotape recordings of the unelicited male, female, parental, and conjugal role portrayals were examined in terms of the children's perception of those roles along the competence and nurturance dimensions, as well as in terms of the tasks and general attitudes associated with the roles. It was found that in the parental role the female is viewed as highly competent; but in the conjugal role, (within which the role relation shifts from the child to the husband) her competence diminishes dramatically. The male, in contrast, appears the more competent in the conjugal role and the less competent in the parental role. The accuracy, depth, and breadth of the children's sex role portrayals is discussed, as well as the preference for same-sex role play. Also included is a discussion of the assimilative and accommodative functions of role play in the early acquisition of sex role and the degree of decentration required for the role play activities to occur. (Author/MS)

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Sex Role Perception, Portrayal, and Preference in the Fantasy Play of Young Children[1]

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Abstract

The naturalistic observation of role-taking behavior in 90 spontaneously-occurring (i.e., unelicited) fantasy play episodes of 16 four-year-old children in same-sex paired interaction revealed: a differential perception of male, female, parental, and conjugal roles, particularly in terms of competence; the accuracy, depth, and breadth of their sex-role portrayals; and a preference for same-sex role play. The assimilative and accommodative functions of role play in the early acquisition of sex role are discussed, as well as the degree of decentration required for the role-play activities to occur.

Sex Role Perception, Portrayal, and Preference in the Fantasy Play of Young Children

Robert Sears (1947) once referred to children's play as "an open sesame, a kind of psychological x-ray into the motivational systems of very young children" (p. 191). For investigators interested in the state of the four-year-old, sometimes an "open sesame" seems to be precisely what is needed; particularly with respect to such questions as: How do young children perceive sex roles? How would sex roles be portrayed by children of four? Do children of this age express any preference for one sex role portrayal over another?

Taking the cue from Sears, it may occur to researchers that a key to answering questions of this kind may well reside not in tests or interviews, but in the very everyday fantasy play of young children. For, in interactive fantasy with a peer, participants are often observed assuming the roles of others in their environment and, in so doing, rendering overt their notions as to the characteristics and the status of those roles. So, instead of probing young children's self-conscious thoughts and feelings about sex roles by traditional laboratory means, a naturalistic approach to children's sex role understanding was adopted. The major question has been: What does children's fantasy play reveal about their sex role perceptions, portrayals, and preferences? The primary goal of the present report is to propose an innovative methodology with which to explore the development of children's understanding of sex roles.

Method

Subjects

Sixteen children (8 boys and 8 girls) served as subjects. They were all: middle-class, white, and between 4-0 and 4-4 years of age. Except for one girl, all of the children were from two-parent families.

Procedure

For three consecutive days, same-sex pairs of previously unacquainted children (4 boy-pairs and 4 girl-pairs) whose maximum age difference was one month were brought to a playroom for one hour of free play, in the absence of an adult. The playroom was an 11 x 14 ft. carpeted room equipped with a wide variety of play material (e.g., dolls, trucks, pounding boards, puzzles, pots and pans, puppets, etc.). One-way mirrors traversed one wall, behind which video-tape equipment was installed. A second camera was concealed on the opposite side of the room to insure constant visibility of both play partners via split-screen filming when necessary.

The resulting 24 hours of interaction were recorded on videotape. Analyses were made from the transcribed protocols of the 90 identified paradigmatic cases of fantasy play that occurred in the course of the children's interaction with one another. The 53 cases of fantasy among the boy-pairs consumed fully 225 minutes, or 43% of their play time; and the 37 cases of fantasy among the girl-pairs consumed 257 minutes, or 48% of their play time. Thus, the present report is based upon comparable amounts of fantasy play among the boys and the girls.

Scoring criteria

The enactment of the thematic fantasy episodes in the course of the children's free play entailed a considerable amount of role-playing by the

participants. Role-playing occurred, however, on a number of different levels.

a) At the most explicit level, the children actually identified themselves or their play partners by a role designation, such as "I'll be the father and you can be the mother." Only when the role designations were explicit was it possible to determine non-inferentially the characteristics of the role as perceived by the child. So, analysis was based on the recording of all and only those behaviors directly accompanying the explicit role designations. From them, "portraits" of the various roles were drawn.

b) At a less explicit level, the children's roles were identifiable by the labels they assigned to the objects incorporated by the fantasy, as in the statement, "This is our baby", referring to the doll. Though the designation implies that the children have assumed parental roles, exactly which role remains unclear. For this reason, these role designations were not included in the present analysis.

c) A third level of role-playing involves the children's performing tasks and exhibiting behaviors normally associated with non-child roles, as in the statement, "I'll do the dishes while you sit down and watch TV." While the household component is evident, it would be impossible to specify precisely whose role--the mother's, the father's, the grandmother's or the older sibling's--is being portrayed. It might even be the case that no particular role is involved, but only an amorphous, "adult-type" role created by the child.

Results

The Portraits

As might be expected, the two most explicitly and most frequently drawn roles were those of the mother and the father.

Observing those activities in which the boys were engaged at the time they explicitly stated that they were the "mommy" or the "daddy", the wife or the husband, yields the following portraits, as perceived by four-year-old sons:

Mothers/wives (according to boys). Mother is the one who cooks, sweeps, makes phone calls (with a telephone which is hooked up to her house), lets daddy pick up dropped objects for her, asks daddy to plug in irons for her, and stays home to watch and help the babies.

Example 1. As Nathan sweeps the carpet with the broom, Chris chants, "There, mommy sweeps, mommy sweeps..."

Example 2. Morgan identifies himself as the daddy; "I'll work for awhile, in my office." "And I'm the mommy, and I'll help you, okay?" asks Jeff. "No," replies Morgan, explaining, "No, you're the mommy. You help David [the baby], okay?"

Example 3. When the hook falls behind the ironing board, Morgan [the daddy] rises and says, "I'll see if I could get it." "I can get it too...right?" asks Jeff [the mommy], for the record. "Right," replies Morgan, "but you don't want to get it, right?" "Right," replies Jeff, obediently, but adding falteringly in defense of his mother role, "but, but mommies cook."

Fathers/husbands (according to boys). Father is the one who takes photographs, comes in a limited supply (one per house), has a large coffee cup with his name on it, serves ice cream to everyone, cooks breakfast sometimes, does not iron (except when mommies are away), tells mommy which car to take, plugs in irons for helpless mommies, tells mommy to sit down when she is clumsy, suggests when bedtime is, holds baby and takes control

in emergency situations, works in an office, and has a telephone that is hooked up to his office.

Example 4. As the boat on which Morgan and Jeff have been taking an excursion burns, the boys struggle to extinguish the fire and save the occupants. Morgan comes to the rescue, "I'll be the driver, okay? I'll be the daddy; I'll drive, r-r-r-r."

Example 5. Mike asks Pat if he can take a picture of him and Pat declines. "Well, I'm, I'm the father," asserts Mike, by way of explanation.

Example 6. As "mommy", Jeff asks helplessly from the ironing board, "Daddy?" "What?" replies Morgan. "Would you put the, the plugger [of the iron] in?" Jeff asks, pointing to the outlet. Morgan rises from the table to perform his manly task.

With respect to the girls' perceptions of mother and father roles, as evidenced by their portrayal of these roles, we find that somewhat different pictures are drawn.

Mothers/wives (according to girls). Mother is the one who knows where everything is (ovens, refrigerators, etc.); irons; puts the clothes out to dry; sweeps, makes cakes, cookies, pancakes, tea, coffee, soup for lunch, chocolate goosecakes from cookbooks, and spaghetti; wears high heels; does not forget to take baby along when mother and father go out for supper; offers tea; holds and hugs babies, does not fix troning boards because "when daddy comes home, hel'll fix it"; announces company, tells father when baby is sick, cuts food for baby, speaks gently to baby; sets the table, does dishes; fetches knives, tea, drinks, and food; helps grandmother fix things; throws the garbage away; carries a purse; picks up the children's toys; dresses baby; tells baby to behave nicely; repairs rugs, expresses

delight when the doctor comes for dinner; brings baby to the hospital, discusses periods of confinement with the doctor; introduces the family to the doctor; stays home and takes care of babies; delivers babies; and arranges for the babysitter.

Example 7. As Kathy struggles to set up the ironing board, she calls out to Karen, "Hey, mother, help me!" Karen helps a bit by pulling the iron and the cord out of the way, and says, "we're havin' trouble here, aren't we?" "Yeah, stupid ironing board... Mother, come and help me, will ya?" asks Kathy, still struggling. "Oh, dear, I got the babies, gotta worry about..., probably when daddy comes home tonight, he'll fix it," replies Karen.

Example 8. When Susan begins to cook, Nancy protests, "No, I'm the mother."

Example 9. As Karen clears off the table, Kathy emerges from her book-reading and says, "Mother, plug the iron in and iron your clothes." "Oh, I can't," replies Karen, "I gotta do the dishes," as she clears the table and places the dishes on the counter.

Fathers/husbands (according to girls). Father is the one who brings home the ice cream, irons sometimes, dresses the baby, fixes things, is bigger than mommy, assists in setting the table, is non-committal about company coming, and wakes up the baby when mother asks him.

Example 10. After finishing dinner, Kathy rises from the table and announces that she is going to the store. "Thank you, wife. That was a good supper. Good-bye," she adds as she leaves.

Example 11. "Father, better go wake him [the baby], father," says Kathy. "Okay," replies Karen, rising from the floor and going to the counter.

Sometimes the enactment of particular roles does not go smoothly. At these times, the boys and girls depart momentarily from the dramatic events of a particular play theme to confer with one another about what constitutes true mother-type or father-type behavior.

Example 12. "I'll be cooking and you telephone, okay?" suggests Morgan, adding, "I'll be the daddy, okay?" "No, no--mommies cook," protests Jeff, walking over to the counter beside Morgan. "Oh, " says Morgan, then, reconsidering, "I'll cook; I'll be the mommy." "Uh?" asks Jeff. "I'll be the mommy," repeats Morgan. "And I'll be the daddy," says Jeff, "'cause I'm the...Good." "You'll be ironing," says Morgan. "Yes, daddy'll iron," confirms Jeff. "Mommies iron. No boys...not daddies," remembers Morgan. "Oh," says Jeff, "an' you can cook," as he turns back to the ironing board in spite of what Morgan has just told him. "No, no, mom..., daddies don't iron," insists Morgan, walking over to the ironing board and grasping the iron to prevent Jeff from ironing until the debate is settled. "But," says Jeff, "when mommies are gone, they [daddies] iron." "When...when the mommies are gone, daddies iron?" asks Morgan. "Yeah," assures Jeff. "Oh," says Morgan, releasing his hold on the iron and returning to the counter.

Example 13. Karen looks on as Kathy irons the dolls' clothes. Then Kathy turns, saying, "This time you can be the mother, okay?" [Karen nods her assent.] "And I'll be the father." "What?" asks Karen. "I'll be the father and you be the mother, okay?" repeats Kathy. "Okay," agrees Karen who hesitates, then adds: "But mothers should iron clothes." "But fathers sometimes iron clothes," replies Kathy, suggesting "you put 'em out to hang, okay?"

Discussion

Role perceptions

General differences. The role-taking activity of young boys engaged in fantasy play reveals a general perception of the female in the role of mother as home-bound and concerned primarily with housekeeping (e.g.11) and child-care (e.g. 2) duties. When cast in the role of wife, however, she becomes somewhat helpless and inept (e.g. 3). The male is perceived by the boys as a leader with respect to both his father and husband role (e.g. 4, 5, 6). Unlike the female, his participation in housekeeping responsibilities appears to be viewed as optional in nature (e.g. 12).

From the girls' point of view the mother is generous, nurturant, and highly managerial. Her house-keeping activities are conveyed as mandatory and, generally, skillfully-executed (e.g. 7, 8, 9). As "wife", however, the female role again acquires an element of helplessness (e.g. 7), particularly marked in contrast to the frequently manifest competence associated with the mother role. The male role is seen as appreciative, masterful, and directive with respect to its husbandly aspect (e.g. 10) and nurturant with respect to its fatherly aspect (e.g. 11). Male participation in household tasks is, again, viewed as optional (e.g. 13).

Competence. The children's perception of the competence of males and females varies with the particular role relations involved. In the parental role, the female is viewed as highly competent; but in the conjugal role, within which the role relation shifts from the child to the husband, her competence diminishes dramatically. The male, in contrast, appears as the more competent in the conjugal role and the less competent in the parental role.

Nurturance. With respect to nurturance, though no really sharp differences emerge, the portrait of the mother as perceived by the sons

does appear to be somewhat lacking in nurturant qualities, relative to what the findings of Emmerich (1959) or of Johnson (1963) might lead us to expect. According to Johnson, "boys would make a sharp distinction between the parents because the father is more controlling toward them than the mother whose degree of nurturance-control is roughly the same toward both sexes" (p. 331). A number of factors might account for the boys' failure to convey a portrait of the mother as nurturant, however. The age of the subjects in the present study might indicate that the fathers have not yet begun to exercise control over their four-year-old sons or that mothers have not yet turned over the disciplinary functions to the father. Or perhaps, in the time span between this and earlier studies, parental role functions have changed further in the direction described by Bronfenbrenner (1961). It could also be that nurturant behavior among boys at play is, in the context of the mother-role, considered unboylike and is, therefore, inhibited; whereas in the context of the father-role, within which all behaviors are ipso facto "masculine", nurturance can be freely expressed. The latter account would be consistent with the cognitive-developmental theory of sex-role acquisition (Kohlberg, 1966) according to which the boy, having an awareness of his gender identity, is motivated to incorporate only those behaviors consistent with that identity into his behavioral repertoire. The behavior of other males is automatically permissible (even if it does not conform to the adult sex-role stereotype) while the behavior of females is suspect and, particularly in the presence of a same-sex peer, best avoided.

Role Portrayals

Accuracy. Judging by the number of discussions that arose in the course of role-taking, the children appeared to be acutely concerned about

portraying the roles accurately. In their effort to achieve some degree of proficiency in their role portrayals, they would frequently interrupt the fantasy episode to debate appropriate role characteristics. Reflected in these debates is not only a general uncertainty about role content, but also a willingness to exert considerable effort to resolve that uncertainty (e.g. 9, 10) and to enact roles according to sincerely-held notions about admissible behavioral attributes.

Depth. While Frieze et al. (in press) may be correct in noting that, in their attempt to categorize and make sense of their world, children of four years focus on "very specific, physical cues that can be perceived and understood easily", and while gender-related cues such as dress (mommies wear high heels and carry purses) and body build (daddies are bigger than mommies) which fit these criteria are prominent in the children's role portrayals, the portraits of mother and father roles drawn earlier suggest that the depth of the children's sex-role perception is greater than one might have assumed, extending into the behavioral realm as well. In fact, the descriptions turn more frequently on behavioral attributes associated with mother/wife and father/husband roles than on physical attributes. Both these realms are overt and relatively superficial however. The more covert, psychological attributes of the roles, conveyed for example by angry or by caring expressions, are only infrequently in evidence.

Breadth. While the children do exhibit some awareness that a parent could at once be a husband and a father, a wife and a mother, they seldom go beyond the two-dimensional view to one of him or her as a worker, or as someone else's sibling. We have seen examples of the two-dimensional portrayal when, for instance, Morgan, as father/husband (e.g. 2), suggests that Jeff, as mother/wife, stay home to care for the baby. And, in the play of Karen and Kathy, Kathy as father/husband leaves the dinner table to

go to the store. Settling in the "car" by the side of the toy box, she calls out, "Come on, wife!...We gotta get goin'!"

The argument can be made, however, that the limited breadth of the portraits is a function of experiential rather than cognitive limitations on the part of the children, since children are so seldom provided the opportunity to see their parents in any but the parental and conjugal roles. Further research, controlling for the extent of children's familiarity with their parents' occupational and extended-family roles, could clarify this issue.

Role Preference

Any role preference on the part of the children at this age seems to be determined less by a perception of differing status for mothers and fathers than by an activity preference. The boys engaged in meal preparation, but few other, activities associated with the mother role. More commonly, the activities they seemed to prefer and in which they were more frequently engaged were not those associated with the mother role (See Matthews, 1975 for a discussion of the activities that the boys engaged in instead.)

Girls showed very little desire to play father-role activities. In fact, they seemed to prefer mother-type activities so much that their division of labor was less commonly along mother/father lines than that of the boys. Instead, they would contrive for one to be mother and the other to be sister, or grandmother, or whatever other female role they could think of, so that each could perform the tasks they associated with the female role. As evidenced by the exchange between Karen and Kathy, father roles, in the context of fantasy play, were expendable:

Example 14. After Karen is designated as mother, she asks Kathy, "An' you be the grandmother, okay?" "Okay," agrees Kathy. "An' who can be the father?" wonders Karen, to which Kathy replies, "No one...you don't need a father."

The thematic analysis associated with the larger study (Matthews, 1975) reveals the extent of this preference: the girls spent nearly three-quarters of their fantasy play time in playing-house activities (30% in meal preparation, and the remaining 45% in general house play), while the boys spent 30% of their fantasy play time in playing-house activities (virtually all of which centered upon meal preparation).

Conclusion

Assimilative and accommodative functions of role-play. Through an analysis of children's fantasy play, differences were found in the sex role perceptions, portrayals, and preference of boys and girls. The questions that emerge in the light of the children's broader perceptions of the same-sex parent are: Does children's role-playing behavior contribute to their increasingly broad perception of the characteristics of the same-sex parental role? i.e., does fantasy role-play serve an accommodative function? Or, does the scope of children's role perception determine the quality or the amount of their role-playing behavior in fantasy? does it serve an assimilative function? Social learning theorists would contend that acquired sex-typed behaviors are a consequence of the imitative aspect of fantasy role-playing; through role-play the children accommodate to the same sex sex-role. Cognitive developmentalists would argue that sex-typing is a necessary pre-condition for the essentially assimilatory role-taking behavior.

The present observations demonstrate that, as the partners participate in the fantasy episodes and all the fantasy role relationships they entail,

the situation takes on a disposition described by Strauss (1956): "Insofar as there is agreement among role-players on what classes of acts go with what classes of persons, there are smoothly functioning relationships between them. Insofar as there is a misunderstanding as to what class of acts properly goes with what categories of persons, then the role relationships are disturbed" (p. 211). The disturbances upon which the debates (e.g. 12, 13) are centered instance and attest to the accommodative function of fantasy play as it pertains to the children's developing notion of sex role by revealing the process of information processing and exchange as it occurs in the course of play. While the assimilative tendencies of the child manipulating aspects of the free play situation to suit his or her fancy are evident, it is through the debates between play partners with conflicting ideas of the role attributes that some strictly accommodative tendencies emerge: the play partners, each with his or her own accurate or inaccurate notions of role attributes, challenge the other's role portrayal, present their respective opinions, consider the authoritativeness of that of their partner, concede and/or compromise on a number of points, and finally agree on a proper portrayal. Through accommodation, each acquires new information about the sex role in question and, as a result, alters his or her notion of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of particular actions. So it seems that role-playing serves a dual, adaptive function both by contributing to the child's ability to accommodate to the actual role attributes of others and by facilitating his or her assimilation of those role attributes to already existing perceptions.

Egocentrism. The observations of the present study suggest too that children of age four are not as egocentric as some might suppose: not only are they able to detach themselves from their own perspective, but they are

aware of the multifaceted nature of the role(s) of others and are able to consider the various perspectives or aspects of the situations they have created in their fantasy play. Granted, these decentered perspectives are limited to two dimensions and to relatively superficial, non-psychological, role attributes; but they do contest to a definite decentration in the perspective of the four-year-old.

Sex role acquisition. Though this investigation has taken the perspective of children's perceptions of adult sex role differences, it has become clear that the perceived differences affect the children's own behavior and, therefore, his or her own developing sex-identity. As Maccoby (1959) has remarked, in assuming the role of male or female adults, the children play at and exercise male and female sex-typed behaviors and come to acquire them as their own: "a child acquires by practicing covertly [or, in the case of interactive fantasy play, overtly] the actions characteristic of the adults with whom he interacts..." (p. 239). Perception, portrayal, and preference: at age four, these cognitive, social, and affective phenomena are inextricably intertwined, each affecting the other. Together, they affect not only the child's view of adults as sex-typed, but the child's own acquisition of sex-typed behaviors.

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